

## HOME READING.

## Outwitted.

Will you be so good as to cut off my hair?"

"What, signorina?" cried the horrified

barber, "cut off your beautiful hair? No,

you don't mean it, I couldn't have the heart."

"Are you a barber, Don Ernanno?" asked

Lucia, with the gravity and firmness peculiar

to her.

"Yes, it is on the sign-board, and I cut

anybody's hair when I am asked, but—

—do you want to sell your beautiful hair?"

he asked, with quite a sad expression in his

kind eyes.

"No, I don't want to sell it, but I want

it cut off, and I have come to ask you to do

it for me," answered Lucia firmly and de-

cidedly.

"Must I really?" said Don Ernanno, feel-

ing a little cast down by the girl's energetic

tone and manner.

"Yes, you must—if you will," was her

rather odd answer, and therewith she hurried

into the shop.

"If you know how it grieved me," began

the barber again, "Is it a vow, signorina?"

"Something of the sort, but it is more

than that to me," was the short answer.

"Then you have quite made up your

mind?" he ventured to ask once more.

"Will you do it or will you not, Don

Ernanno?" asked Lucia as if she were much

offended and would leave the shop.

"Well—if it really must be done—please

to sit down, signorina," said the barber,

moving reluctantly to the cupboard in which

he kept his implements.

Just at this moment two men came into

the shop, and with a sly glance at his

customer, "You are engaged, Don Ernanno?"

"At your service in a moment, gentle-

men," he answered; then bending over Lucia

and taking her great plait, which was

almost as thick as her arm, in his hand, he

said in a low tone, "You will have just a

little bit left?"

"No, cut it off close," answered Lucia in

a whisper.

Don Ernanno gently put her head in the

right position; and Lucia looking calmly

and cheerfully into the little glass before

her, could see with a dismal counter-

once the light-haired giant went about his

task, which was no such easy one, and took

some minutes to accomplish. It was done

at last, however, and the barber held the

severed plait in his hands, his face wearing

a very troubled expression.

"Good-morning, gentlemen," said Lucia,

rising and bowing to the two men; "good-

morning, Don Ernanno!" and before he had

recovered from his astonishment, Lucia was

out of the shop and trotting away on her

mule, leaving him to look after her and

shake his head in perplexity, while he still

held the beautifully plaited tail of hair in

his hands.

"A very pretty customer, signor!" said

his visitors, who had not heard all that had

passed.

"A lovely girl," answered Don Ernanno

thoughtfully, "but strange, very strange, I

can't make her out."

"Have you bought the plait?" they asked.

The barber shook his head gravely.

"What then?" they asked with curiosity.

"I don't know," was the short answer,

as the barber made hurried preparations for

shaving his customers.

He was anything but nervous in a general

way, but to day his hand trembled so much

that he would certainly have performed his

duties very clumsily if he had not made a

great effort to recover his self command.

"What does it mean?" he muttered, when

he found himself once more alone. "What

am I to do with it? I wonder whether it is

a vow: I know the women about here do

make strange vows sometimes; but she is

so clever and sensible and not at all super-

stitious."

Don Ernanno thought over the affair for

some time, but as he could not arrive at any

conclusion, he locked the plait of hair up in

his cupboard, and spent the next few hours

in a rather uncomfortable state of mind,

feeling that he was involved against his will

in a matter which he did not understand.

It is the same!" screamed others. "It's

just the same. It would make no difference

if he were a townsman—the shall die if he

went; do you justice and restore our

honour; yes, he shall die by our hands,"

cried all, old and young, with angry flash-

ing eyes.

He must give the village satisfaction

at once," cried one who had taken the lead.

"I will go to him now. Take your knives,

my men, and stay 'till you've seen me."

"I'll!" cried at least twenty voices, and

a number of men separated from the rest

and started off at a rapid pace along the

road to Palenno.

Lucia now dismounted, led the mule into

his stable and retreated to her dismal little

room out of her mother's way. Here she

sat down quite exhausted on the only chair

it contained, and drew a deep breath.

"Now no one can kill me for marrying

me, for they will make him," she said softly

to herself, "and he won't refuse. He likes

me. I'm sure of that now, and Pietro An-

tonio won't dare to touch him, for he would

have the whole village against him."

It was about an hour after all this com-

motion that the first of the Palenella peas-

ants entered Don Ernanno's wine shop and

called for a tumbler of wine. In a few

seconds more another came in, and then a

third and before the barber knew where he

was, his room was filled with peasants, all

of whom carried knives in their girdles,

and looked very menacing.

Don Ernanno, though perfectly disposed,

was a brave man enough, but he could not

help feeling somewhat against the present

occasion, for there was evidently some

thing strange about his visitors.

"Don Ernanno," began the spokesman,

"you have cut off the plait of one of our girls

—eh, is it so?"

"Yes," returned the barber with some

embarrassment, but without the slightest

suspicion of what was meant, or what the

question implied.

"Have you the plait?"

"Yes, I have."

"Then please to show it to us."

The barber went and fetched it from the

cupboard and held it up, saying, "Here it is."

"You know the girl?" they inquired fur-

ther.

"Yes, it is Lucia Cerrano: I have known

her a long time."

"Good! Will you marry her?" inquired

the leader suddenly stepping up to the barber.

"Marry—Lucia Cerrano?" exclaimed

Don Ernanno, quite taken aback.

"Will you?" and a dozen large knives

flashed into the air, while in an instant the

men had closed the entrance into the shop,

and surrounded the terrified owner and driv-

en him into a corner.

"Yes or no?" said they in suppressed

tones.

Lugeno looked from one to the other and

tried to collect himself. He saw plainly

enough that it was no laughing matter, for

the men were looking at him with an ex-

pression of deadly hatred in their eyes, and

they looked so sullen and determined that

he felt he had never before been so im-

mediately face to face with death. He

could hardly breathe, but he struggled to

say: "I will marry her."

"Still, man," whispered the ringleader,

"no shirking and no unnecessary words.

Answer me: will you marry Lucia Cerrano,

of Palenella, whose plait you have cut off,

or not? Say you will, now, this instant, with-

out any hinging, or in two minutes you are

a dead man, as sure as we all stand here!"

A gleam of joy and relief came into Don

Ernanno's eyes; he breathed more freely,

and wiping his forehead, said with a smile,

"Why, of course I will, my men, with all

my heart, if she will have me."

"She must!" was the rejoinder, spoken

in tones of such determination as before.

"Then you swear, before us, to marry

Lucia as soon as possible, at all events

within the month, and you will be married

in our church, by our priest!"

"I swear it," said the barber, with great

alacrity.

"That's well; and you have acted wisely,

master, let me tell you, for you would not

have left your soul alive otherwise!"

Thereupon the men put up their knives,

ordered some wine, each separately drank to

the health of the still bewildered Don Er-

nanno, bade him a polite farewell, and re-

turned to the village. The evening was not far

advanced when they reached Palenella, and

going straight to Mother Cerrano's house,

they found her still lamenting and vituper-

ating the rascal who had done the evil deed,

while Lucia was sitting contentedly at the

table eating her supper with a good appetite.

"We have good news for you, Lucia,"

cried a dozen voices; "be'll marry you."

He has solemnly sworn to marry you within

the month. You may be quite easy about

it, for he will do all that is right by you, and

he will give us satisfaction. He is a clever

man, much respected, and as good as any

one in the village."

"Thank you, my friends, I am quite satis-

fied. You have done me a good turn, and

I'll never forget it," said Lucia, looking

positively radiant with happiness.

That night the village was a long time in

settling down to its usual state of quietness;

for the men felt they had achieved a grand

victory and could do no less than celebrate

it, little guessing, of course, that they had

been outwitted by a girl, and that so far

from being the victors they had actually

been defeated, and had their own weapons

turned against them.

Meanwhile, in spite of her happiness, Lu-

cia was feeling a little uneasy as to the way

in which Don Ernanno might view her con-

duct, and very early in the morning she

was in the shop again.

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